

# A PARCEL FOR THE POSTMASTER

Dronvir Kohli









*Nehru Bal Pustakalaya*

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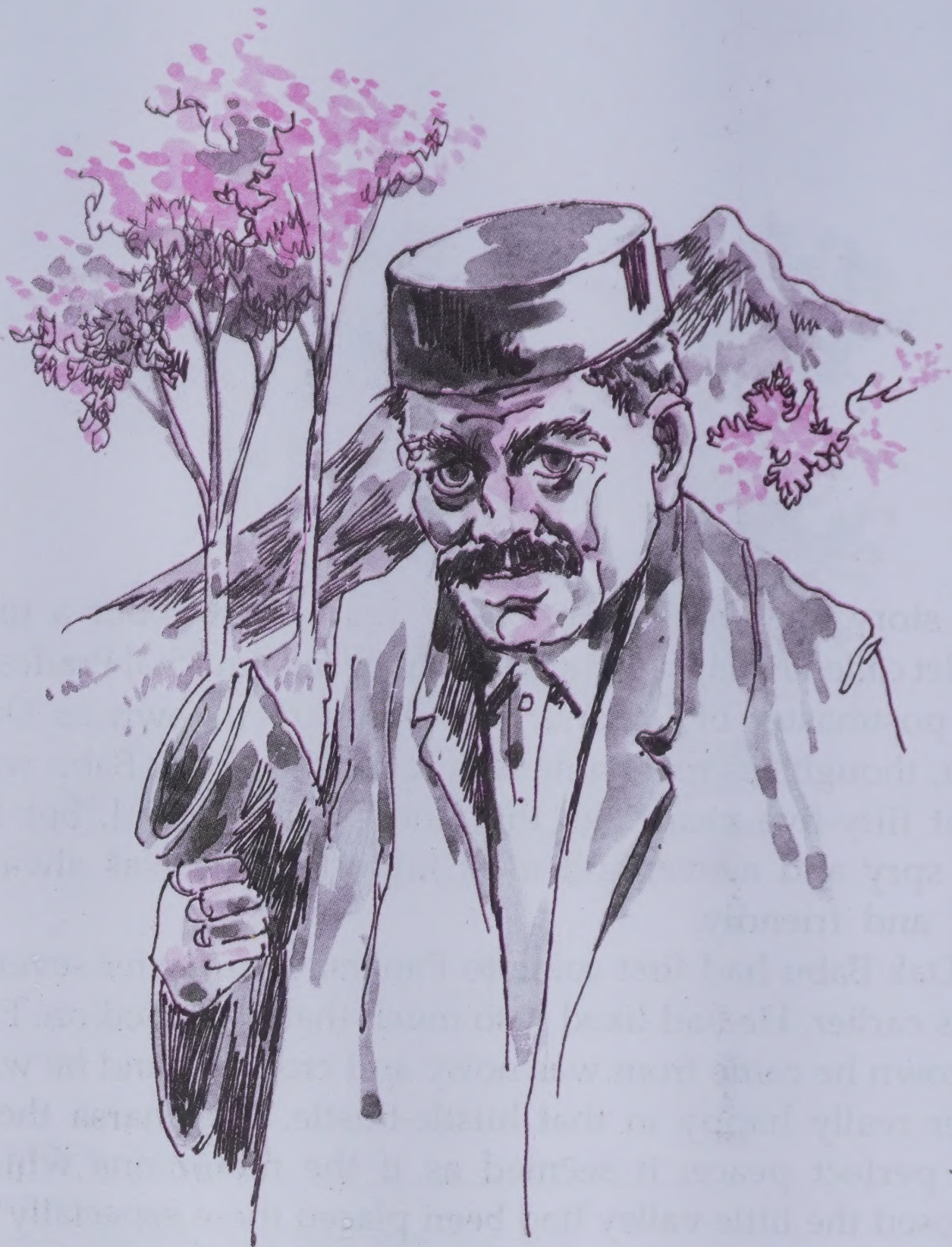


## ONE

This story goes back a couple of years. It is about a tiny hamlet called Panarsa in the Kulu valley in Himachal Pradesh. The postmaster of Panarsa was popularly known as Dak Babu, though his real name was Ram Dhan. Dak Babu was about fifty-five years old, thin and small of build, but he was spry and active; and most important, he was always kind and friendly.

Dak Babu had first come to Panarsa on transfer several years earlier. He had liked it so much that he stayed on. For the town he came from was noisy and crowded and he was never really happy in that hustle-bustle. In Panarsa there was perfect peace; it seemed as if the mountains which enclosed the little valley had been placed there especially to keep out the din and clamour. Moreover, Panarsa had trees whose tops touched the sky. It had lush green fields; and gardens laden with flowers and fruit. The air was pure and the Beas river's crystal-clear water gurgled merrily along; but, above all, the people of the valley were simple and honest.





Dak Babu lost his heart to Panarsa, and settled down there happily.



## TWO

One day, Dak Babu received a parcel. It didn't have his name on it; where the address should be, there was just one line: For the Dak Babu of Panarsa in Kulu.

The parcel was from Delhi. The sender's name and address were clearly written in a corner. Dak Babu adjusted his thick, round spectacles and peered at it. The sender appeared to be a Suresh Kumar of New Delhi, from a place called "Alakananda".

Dak Babu examined the parcel closely, turning it this way and that, wondering who this Suresh might be. As far as he knew, he had no relatives or friends in Delhi and he didn't know anyone by the name of Suresh. If he had known him, wouldn't Suresh have addressed the parcel to him by name?

Dak Babu sat there trying to solve the puzzle. He took off his round black cap and scratched his head from time to time. He even picked up the parcel a few times to guess its weight. It seemed quite heavy, which surprised him. What on earth did it contain?





The post office of Panarsa was a small one, as in any mountain hamlet. Apart from Dak Babu, it had only one other postman. His name was Keshav, and at this particular moment, he was dozing in his chair. There was no one else in the post office.



There couldn't have been a greater contrast between the two men. Keshav was as tall and fat as Dak Babu was small and thin. And, he was bone lazy too. Once he sat down, there was no moving him. Though half Dak Babu's age, he wasn't even half as active. He would doze off wherever he sat down.

Dak Babu, as we have seen, was already unsettled by the arrival of the parcel. When he saw Keshav dozing yet again, he lost his temper.

"Oy, Keshav!" he shouted.

"Yes, Babuji, yes." Keshav woke with a start but quickly collected himself.





The chair on which Keshav was napping had only three legs. The fourth leg had been replaced by a pile of bricks. The reason for this was that one day after Keshav had lowered his bulk into the chair, something made him burst into a fit of laughter. The chair was old and fragile. Under Keshav's heavy, shaking frame it collapsed. Keshav emerged unhurt; he didn't suffer even a scratch but the poor chair was crippled for life. So, Keshav had replaced its fourth leg with bricks and always sat down and got up carefully. He didn't want the bricks to shift and be landed flat on the floor!

On hearing Dak Babu's voice Keshav glanced at him drowsily.

"Dozing all day!" rebuked Dak Babu. "Why eat so much that you can't budge? What a glutton you are!"

"Yes, yes, Babuji."

"Yes, yes, Babuji," mimicked Dak Babu, screwing up his eyes and mouth. Then seeing Keshav's state he felt sorry for him and said gently, "First open your eyes, then undo this parcel. Hurry."

Keshav raised himself cautiously from the rickety chair. His belly protruded so much that when he stood up he couldn't see his knees or feet. He wore a fifteen-centimetre wide leather belt to hold up his loose, khaki trousers but they still kept slipping, and Keshav had to hitch them up repeatedly.

In response to Dak Babu's sharp tone, Keshav came forward, gingerly holding up his trousers. He picked up the parcel sulkily and returned to his desk, pouting like a child about to cry.



Dak Babu said impatiently, "Hurry. Open the parcel quickly. You still have to deliver all the post. When will you set off and when will you return?"

Although Dak Babu ticked off Keshav occasionally he was obviously fond of him. That's why Keshav didn't mind the dressing down. He did, however, sulk and he was sulking as he opened the parcel.

The package was wrapped in cloth. When this was cut, a cardboard box was revealed. On opening this, Keshav stepped back, startled.

Dak Babu's eyes were on Keshav. Why did he look so taken aback? "What is it?" Dak Babu asked. "Is there a snake





or a scorpion inside that you should look so stunned!"

Keshav kept staring at the open box, eyes popping out of his head. He tried to say something but the words seemed to stick in his throat. Finally he managed to utter, "D...d...dak Ba—ba—ba—bu..."

Somewhat alarmed, Dak Babu got up and asked, "Why, what on earth's the matter?" and quickly walked upto the frightened-looking Keshav. When he peered into the box himself, he too was dumfounded. The box did not contain a snake or a scorpion. What it did have, was a small flat round stone.

Dak Babu stood there looking stunned while Keshav trembled like someone who has mistaken a rope for a snake in the dark.

After a while Dak Babu collected his wits. Then the whole thing became clear. Why, he thought, this was someone's idea of practical joke. Why else should anyone send a stone by post?

Having solved the puzzle, Dak Babu quietly picked up the parcel and sat down at his desk. He said to Keshav, "Are you a man or a crow? Frightened of a stone? Now go and deliver the letters. If you delay, the whole village will descend on us."

Keshav quietly began to put the letters inside his satchel. Occasionally he glanced sideways at Dak Babu. He was bewildered, and somewhat frightened. What sort of parcel was this which contained a stone?

Then, Keshav slung his bag over his shoulder like a reluctant school-boy, straightened his cap and stuck his pen behind his ear. Hitching up his slipping trousers one last time, still sulking, he made his way out of the door.



### THREE

Alone at last in the post office, Dak Babu took out the stone from the box and scrutinized it. The stone was slate coloured, about three or four centimetres in diameter—an ordinary stone. Mountain streams were full of such stones. It's true it was slightly scratched at one place; otherwise it was quite ordinary.

Placing the stone on his desk, Dak Babu peered inside the box again. There was a piece of paper there—a letter. He took it in at a glance. It was signed "Suresh". The handwriting appeared to be that of a child.

Dak Babu stared at it, perplexed. Then, pulling himself together he began to read:

*Dak Babu Saheb. Namaskar.*

*I know that this parcel with its stone will surprise you. It might even alarm you...*

At this point Dak Babu looked up and said irritably to no one in particular, "You brat. I was surprised of course. But what about Keshav the postman? Your parcel nearly gave him a heart attack." Having got this off his chest Dak Babu





turned to the letter again:

*...My name, too, will be unfamiliar. You'll wonder who this Suresh is who sent a stone in a parcel. So, let me introduce myself first, then I'll tell you what I want.*

*My name is Suresh Kumar and I live in Delhi. I study in the eighth standard. My father is a businessman. I'm the only child of my parents. Some time back we went to the Kulu valley on holiday. On our return from Manali we passed through your hamlet. I picked up this stone from the banks of the river there.*

*Now I want this stone to go back to the place where it*



*belongs. That's why I am sending it to you. Will you please take it back to the bank of the river? I'll tell you the exact spot. A little below your post office, a pakoda-seller has his wooden stall. A path skirts his stall and leads on to the river. If you follow this path, you will come across two large boulders standing side by side on the banks. In the place between them, there are many stones like this one. Please put this stone there. Of course, it will mean some trouble but I'm sure you won't refuse. Please forgive me for making this request.*

*Yours sincerely,  
Suresh Kumar*

Dak Babu was nonplussed. Whoever heard of such a request! He said to himself, "Suppose it's a joke?" As the thought crossed his mind, Dak Babu put the letter on the table and placed the stone on it like a paperweight. "I'm sure this mad man is out to play a trick. Mischievous boy, wants to make a fool of me."

Just then a noise outside startled him. Balram, a boy of eleven or twelve, who was a neighbour of his, was standing in the doorway.

Dak Babu knew why Balram was there. He must have come to enquire about the money-order he was expecting from his elder brother who worked in the city. On his last visit he had promised his younger brother, "If you study hard and get good marks, I'll send you a money-order for twenty rupees." Though almost three months had gone by, there was no sign of a money-order. Poor Balram came every other day to enquire about it. Dak babu usually managed to



console him before sending him back.

But this time, the very sight of Balram sent Dak Babu's blood pressure shooting up. Usually he did not lose his temper easily. Today, however, the stone and the letter had unsettled him. Now, he barked, "You again! How many times have I told you that as soon as your money comes Keshav will bring it straight to your house? No one is going to run away with your money-order. But you insist on coming every day. Now get out, do you hear? Your precious money-order still hasn't come..."

Balram did not expect this. Bewildered, he stood rooted to the spot. He had never heard Dak Babu speak so angrily before. What had happened to him today?

"Go for Heaven's sake, go!" Dak Babu shouted again. Balram turned on his heels and fled, his eyes full of tears.

Dak Babu was filled with remorse. "Why did I shout at that poor boy?" he asked himself regretfully. "It wasn't his fault, after all. He only came to ask about his money-order. He's waited for it long enough! If only I had talked to him gently as I usually do and lessened his disappointment he wouldn't have been hurt.... Well I'll call him back and explain . . . ." And getting up, he hurried to the door. Balram was still in sight, so Dak Babu called out—"Come here."

Balram froze. But when Dak Babu shouted to him again he reluctantly returned. His face was tear-stained.

Dak Babu chided him affectionately, " Good Heavens, crying just because your money-order hasn't arrived? Little one, don't I tell you every single day, that as soon as it arrives we'll have it sent to your house? Do you need money badly? Here, take five rupees. You can get your books, pens or copy-books, whatever you need. You can return it when the



money-order arrives." And, Dak Babu held out a five-rupee note.

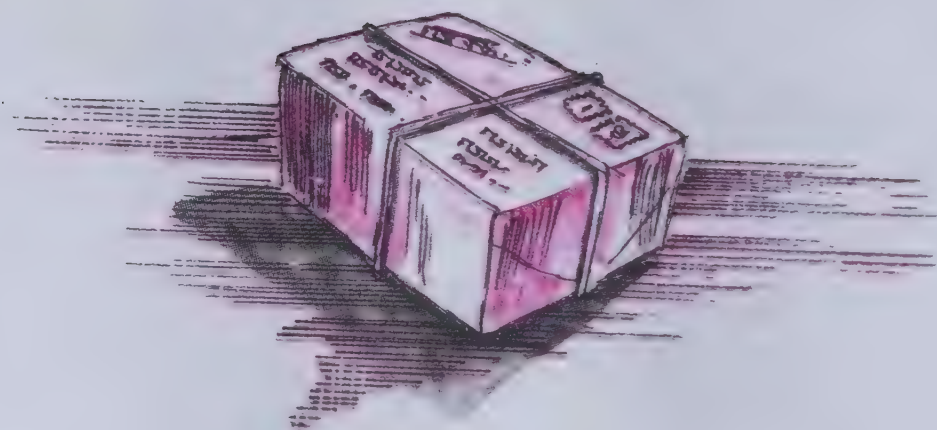
But, Balram wouldn't take it. He muttered, "No, no, Dak Babu. I'll only take the money my brother sends — no one else's."





Dak Babu looked at him intently. Deeply moved by what he heard, he said, "All right. As soon as your money-order comes I'll inform you myself. Now run."

Balram left and Dak Babu returned to his chair. His head was aching. First, he fussed with the papers on his desk. Then, almost involuntarily, he took out the letter from underneath the stone and began reading it again. He felt the same irritation and bewilderment. He said to himself, "This Delhite has used me for his delight!"





## FOUR

Everybody in the hamlet made fun of Keshav, the postman. As soon as they saw him, the more mischievous boys began taunting him. Keshav, however, took it all in his stride.

Once Keshav was on his way to the bazaar with his short, skinny wife and their three small children, each one just a shade bigger than the other. It seemed as if an enormous bear was out for a stroll with a hen and her three chicks! Everyone laughed at them, but Keshav didn't mind. He joined in the laughter. Even his wife and children laughed merrily.

But today Keshav was a little worried. For a start, seeing the parcel had given him quite a turn. Then Dak Babu had let fly at him. So he was in no mood for pleasantries. When one of the lads began to walk alongside him and made a cheeky face, Keshav chided him. Then another boy accosted him and asked, "Mr Postman, would there be a letter for us in your sack?"

Keshav really lost his temper now. Leaning as far forward as his protruding stomach allowed, he snapped, "Yes, there is. It says your mother-in-law has died. Do you want it?"





The embarrassed lad took to his heels and everyone burst out laughing.

Keshav began a tirade against his tormentors. "Bunch of ignorant fools. Don't they teach their children anything? They don't know how to behave towards elders or how to show respect. Look at him — like father like son. He asks me, 'Would there be a letter for us in your sack?' Idiot!"

A little further on, another boy fell into step with Keshav and asked impudently, "Mr. Postman, what do you keep inside your belly?"



Of course, Keshav was often asked this. If he was in a good mood, he would chuckle and say, "Goodies, my friend, goodies. Halwa, puris, rasmalai: the things I feast on."

But today he bristled with anger. Turning round, he bel-  
lowed, "I'll tell you what's in here! A whole lot of garbage. Do you want it on your head? Scram you!"

The boy fled. "Rascal. Scoundrel. Idiot." Stamping his feet in rage Keshav yelled after him, "Get lost!"

Only Keshav knew what he kept inside his stomach — sweetmeats or rubbish, but he certainly couldn't keep anything to himself. If he heard some gossip or was told a secret he just had to blurt it out and get it off his chest. Otherwise he would have no peace.

And today's was no ordinary secret. For Dak Babu to receive a stone in the post — well, that didn't happen every day. Keshav was bursting with the news, and he would only be at peace after he'd confided in a few people. So, when he went to the school to deliver the post, he could not restrain himself. As he handed over the letters to the headmaster Manohar Pandey, he whispered confidentially, "Pandeyji."

The headmaster looked up at the postman. Keshav seemed on edge. "Why! What's the matter, Keshav?" he asked.

Keshav looked around. When he saw that they were alone, he leaned over and said in Pandeyji's ear, "Pandeyji, don't tell anybody. Today Dak Babu is very worried."

"Why on earth?" asked the headmaster, surprised.

"Well..." said Keshav making a face and nodding his head a few times. Then looking solemnly at Pandeyji he pronounced, "Dak Babu received a stone in the post..."

Pandeyji looked blank. "I don't understand. What do



you mean, Keshav."

"Oh, well...!" Keshav shook his head again. "Somebody has sent Dak Babu a parcel with a stone this big."

"Really!" said the headmaster looking at Keshav, round-eyed.

Now Keshav of course thought that he had only told the secret to the headmaster. He didn't know that a school-boy, Mohan, was being punished and was sitting in a corner of the headmaster's room, his head between his knees, holding his ears. Mohan overheard everything, and as soon as he was allowed to go, he raced back to his classroom. There were a few minutes to go before the bell rang for the end of school. The teacher had left the classroom, the boys were packing their bags. Mohan called everyone around him. In shocked tones, he said confidentially, as if sharing a great secret, "Just listen to this. Somebody sent Dak Babu a parcel with a stone in it. A stone so... o.. o... big." Mohan gestured with both hands. "So big... as big as a football."

"Really!" all the boys exclaimed wide-eyed.

"How do you know?" asked one. "Didn't you have your head between your knees?"

Mohan straightened his collar and raised his head. "You don't know what Mohan is capable of. Listen, my lads. Mohan can whisk things out of the highest eagle's nest. He can discover a secret which is concealed inside seven fortresses. Hee hee hee!"

This silenced the boys. However, taking courage in both hands, one of them said, "Who has ever heard of sending a stone by post? Surely it's a bomb."

"Yes!" and they all immediately looked terrified as if





expecting a bomb to explode any moment.

"Tin-tin-tin-tin!" the bell rang. The boys scrambled out of their classes noisily like a flock of birds flying out of a tree when a stone is flung at them. They usually raced home but today, forgetting hunger and thirst, they made straight for the post office.

Dak Babu was at work. Amazed to see a noisy crowd of children collected outside, he abandoned his accounts and going towards them, shouted, "Where has this swarm of bees come from? What's this all about? Why are you all here?"

To begin with the boys were tongue-tied and just looked at each other nervously. Then Mohan plucked up courage and said, "Dak Babu, what does your parcel contain?"

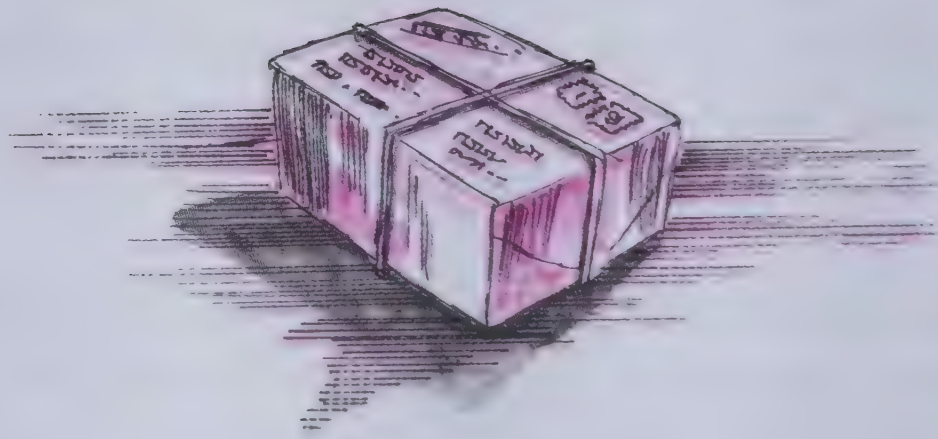
Dak Babu was speechless with amazement. How on



earth did these brats know? It didn't take him long to guess the truth. This was undoubtedly the work of Keshav the postman. No secret was ever safe with him. He was probably wandering all over the village blabbering the story to everyone he met.

Dak Babu's silence strengthened the boys' suspicions. One boy shouted, "Dak Babu, it must be bomb! It might explode any minute..." And they all scattered as if the bomb was just about to explode.

Dak Babu was furious. He stood at the door raging to himself, "Let that good-for-nothing come. I'll show him. Blurting it out all over the village!"





## FIVE

In fact Keshav was doing just that, blurting it out to all and sundry. And needless to say, soon a stream of people began to pour into the post office.

The first to arrive was the headmaster. He asked anxiously, "Dak Babu, what's this we are hearing?"

"What?" said Dak Babu. "What is it you've been hearing?"

"Arre. For Heaven's sake, Dak Babu!" said the headmaster worriedly. "Don't hide it from us. Every child in the village knows about it. What was in your parcel?"

When the children asked Dak Babu this question, he managed to laugh it off, but when the headmaster questioned him he lost his temper and chided him, "If a fool tells you 'fairies are about to land here' will you believe him...?"

"No, no, Dak Babu..." the headmaster tried to explain, but Dak Babu snapped, "What do you mean, 'No, No!' All that's happened is that some wretched boy played a prank and the whole village picks up its ears.... Please go home."



This encounter, however, made Dak Babu rather uneasy. He realized that Keshav was doling out gossip along with distributing letters. Suppose the whole village was to turn up?

And that's exactly what happened. Dak Babu's fears were soon realized. The headmaster had barely left when Lala Mukut Bihari came limping up. "Dak Babu, Dak Babu!" he panted breathlessly. "I'm hearing such things! Has someone sent you a bomb?"

"You've heard right," said Dak Babu sarcastically. "It will explode any moment. God forbid, your life..."

"Oh my God!" Lalaji immediately turned on his heels and fled.

Others also arrived. One said, "Dak Babu, we are living in bad times. You must do something quickly."







Another said, "I hope this isn't black magic?"

Yet another asked if he had informed the police.

Then there arrived on the scene eight to ten men, among them the village priest. All of them could not fit into the small post office, so they crowded around outside. Everyone wanted to know who had sent the stone and what sort of stone it was.

By now Dak Babu had begun to find the whole thing



amusing. It was amazing how this molehill had grown into a mountain! To set everybody's mind at rest he took the stone out of his drawer and placed it on the table, where they could all see it. "There," he said, "There it is. Does it look like a bomb?"

Everyone craned their necks to get a look at it. No, it certainly wasn't a bomb. It was only a stone. Who had spread those absurd rumours?

The priest came forward and gave his opinion. "Dak Babu, don't leave it lying around on the table like this. God knows what sort of stone it is. Suppose some thing untoward happens..."

"Yes!Yes!" said everyone in unison. "Purohitji is right."

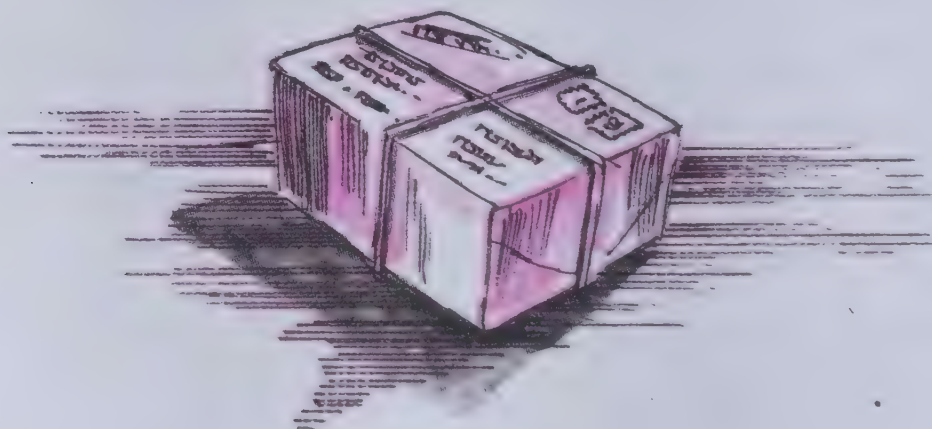
"Get rid of it straightaway," suggested someone.

The priest said, "Put it into the river."

Dak Babu smiled at this. "That's exactly what I was about to do," he said. "Rest assured no one will come to any harm."

"Don't delay," said someone. "Put it in at once."

After dispensing all this advice, they dispersed. Dak Babu laughed heartily. He said to himself, "Set a rumour afloat and see what it ends up as! That reminded him of Keshav and he began to frown. "Let that glutton show his face. I'll teach him a lesson..."





## SIX

Shortly afterwards Keshav made his appearance. He had clearly been spreading the news about the parcel to everyone he met, and by the time he returned to the post office he was feeling very guilty indeed, and rather nervous.

Dak Babu was absorbed in his work. As Keshav's broad frame entered the doorway, it blocked the light, rather like clouds covering the sun, and Dak Babu raised his head. "Come in, come in," he said sarcastically. "So you've finally presented yourself. You should be blowing a trumpet, where is it?"

Keshav winced. He began to stammer, "I... I never said a thing!"

"What?" said Dak Babu. "Did I ask you if you had?"

After a pause he added, "So you've now begun to lie as well."

"No, no, Dak Babu. I never said anything to anyone."

Dak Babu barked, "Then did everybody hear it on the radio news? Or did they all get telegrams announcing it?"



Keshav swallowed. He whined, "Dak Babu, all I said was that a stone had arrived. I swear by Ram."

"Why on earth can't you keep anything to yourself?" said Dak Babu taking in Keshav's tearful countenance.

"Look, you say one thing; others will embellish it with another ten things. Why don't you understand? I've told you a hundred times. Are you just a fool?" Keshav felt very small. Looking at his feet, he said, "I'll never do it again, Dak Babu. Please forgive me."

Dak Babu knew that the postman was not as much to blame as the villagers. It was they who were ever ready to make a mountain out of a molehill. So he did not harp on the matter and said to Keshav, "It's time for the mail van. Get the mail quickly and sort it out."







Remorse was writ large on Keshav's face as he took the key and shuffled out. He had never dreamt that his gossiping would lead to this.





The post-box hung on a pillar. Keshav unlocked it and took out the letters. Then looking eastwards, he gazed at the mountain where a large portion of the road snaking its way up was visible. Since he could not see the mail van coming



along it, he went back inside and sat down.

He had his work cut out for him. Sorting out the letters; postmarking them. The very first letter riled him. The stamp was stuck on the wrong side of the envelope. "Ignoramus-es!" he grumbled. "Don't even know where to place a stamp; put it wherever they like." Muttering this, he turned the envelope over and postmarked it with an angry thud.

Hearing the bang, Dak Babu called out, "Oy, Keshav! What are you grumbling about? Are you marking the letters or exploding bombs? Hurry, for Heaven's sake. The mail van will be here any minute."

So Keshav got down to postmarking the letters thak-thak, thak-thak, and in a short time he had completed the work. The mail van arrived; deposited the mail bag and departed.

It was nearly closing time. Keshav finished his work and prepared to leave. Dak Babu was still hard at work. Keshav got up hesitantly and slowly went to Dak Babu's desk. Hanging his head shamefacedly he said, "Dak Babu, please forgive me. I will never do such a thing again."

Dak Babu softened. He said, "Learn to keep things to yourself sometimes. Now go. You are forgiven."

Keshav began to grin delightedly. "Have you really forgiven me?"

"You want me to give it to you in writing on official paper?"

Glowing with happiness, Keshav saluted his superior. "Jai Hind, Sir!" he said as he left.



## SEVEN

Dak Babu had decided that before going home he would take the stone down to the river-bank.

When the evening darkened Dak Babu got up. He picked up the letter, put it carefully in an inner pocket of his coat and the stone in an outer pocket. Then, he picked up his umbrella, locked the post office, and set out.

A bus was standing in front of the stall run by Nathu, the pakoda-seller. Passengers were crowding around the stall. Nathu was doing roaring business.

That was just as well. If Nathu had not been busy, he would certainly have stopped Dak Babu and asked about the parcel. Skirting the stall quietly, Dak Babu continued on his way.

It was only a short walk. Suresh had described the place well. Two boulders stood near the bank. Dak Babu came closer. Between the boulders was a heap of stones like the one he had.

Dak Babu took the stone out of his pocket.

One thing continued to puzzle him. He asked himself,







"Who is this boy? Why is he making me do all this? And why am I obeying him so meekly? Could the boy be following some sort of superstition? Why should I be involved..."

It was quite dark now. Dak Babu gazed intently at the stone once more, then bent down and gently placed it on the ground.

No sooner had he done so than a strange thing happened. A burst of laughter came to his ears, as if from a bunch of children rejoicing.

Dak Babu's heart almost stopped beating, but he stood there quietly and looked around. And, as suddenly as it had begun, the laughter stopped. There was an eerie silence. It was so quiet it seemed as if the river had ceased to flow. You couldn't even hear the rustling of the wind in the surrounding tall trees.

Dak Babu was utterly baffled. It was as though a throng of children had been tickled and gone into peals of laughter. What sort of mystery had he got mixed up with?





Now Dak Babu did not believe in black magic or such things. But this seemed even stranger than black magic. Could it be a figment of his imagination? He wasn't dreaming, was he? Of course not, he chided himself. His ears wouldn't deceive him. He had heard the sound of children laughing...

Dak Babu stood rooted to the spot as though someone was holding his legs firmly. Then the murmur of the river and whisper of the wind in the trees brought him out of his trance. He stood there perplexed till it was completely dark and he was compelled to move quietly homeward.

By now the bus had left. Nathu was still there, counting the day's earnings in the light of a petromax lamp. Dak Babu had hoped to go past unnoticed, but Nathu looked up and saw him. He said at once, "Dak Babu. Have some fresh hot pakodas. I've just fried them."

But Dak Babu refused.

Then Nathu blurted out, "Dak Babu, what's this every one is saying?"

Dak Babu replied, "They are talking about somebody having posted me a stone, isn't it? Well, if you want I'll leave it here for you. Do you want to fry it like a pakoda?"

Nathu was well and truly silenced. Leaving him speechless, Dak Babu continued on his way.

A man was waiting for him near his home. Dak Babu knew perfectly well what he wanted. So before the man could open his mouth he said, "My friend, there's no letter for you," and made his way quickly home. "Letters, letters, letters," he muttered to himself. "Every Tom, Dick and Harry wants a letter every single day. You'd think that without seeing a letter they can't digest their food..."



## EIGHT

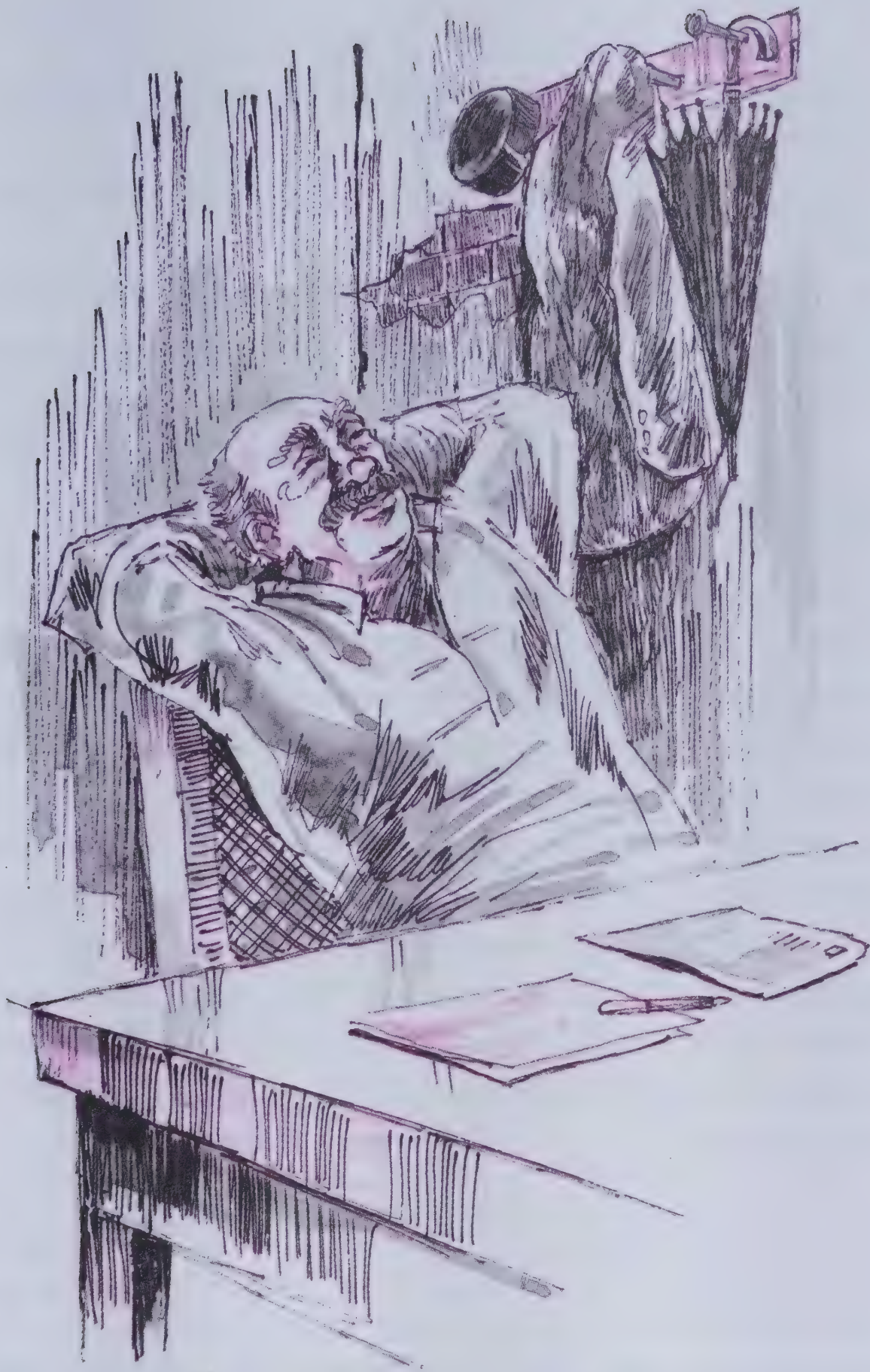
Dak Babu lived alone. He had no family and cooked for himself twice a day. Today, however, he had no appetite for his evening meal. The arrival of the stone had not really bothered him, but the incident by the river-bank had certainly unnerved him.

On reaching home, he switched on the light, put his umbrella away, hung up his coat and sat down in his chair to think over the day's events.

The whole thing was incredible. It was as though a tape-recorder's button had been pressed by the placing of the stone and a tape of children laughing had begun to play. He again wondered if he had dreamt it all. It was no ordinary laughter; it was like the joyous laughter of people who had been reunited after a long separation. He couldn't have been mistaken, could he? No, he had heard it with his very own ears.

Dak Babu couldn't unravel the mystery. Sitting on his chair, the poor man was in a terrible sweat. As he wiped his forehead, a thought suddenly struck him. The Suresh who





had written to him seemed quite intelligent. Why not write to him and ask what the mystery was all about? "My lad, what's all this? Why did you send me the stone? And what did the laughter mean?"



It was the mystery of the laughter which worried Dak Babu most.

"Right," he said suddenly decisive. "I'll write and ask Suresh!"

Then taking out an inland form from the drawer he sat down at his desk. After some thought he wrote the following.

*Dear Suresh,*

*I don't know who you are and why you sent me such an unusual parcel. To please you, and to remove the misgivings of the superstitious villagers I went a little while ago and placed the stone where you asked me to. I have just returned.*

*But a very strange thing happened as soon as the stone touched the ground. There were peals of childish laughter. I assure you I did not imagine it; I heard it with my own ears. In fact the same laughter is ringing in my ears even now as I write to you.*

*Now, I ask you, my friend, what is this all about? I'm not superstitious; I don't believe in magic; but I really am at my wits' end. I must know what is behind these mysterious happenings. I am certain that you'll hide nothing, that you'll tell me the truth. I await your reply.*

*Yours,  
Ram Dhan  
Sub-Postmaster*

He read the letter through a couple of times and made a few changes to ensure that the boy could understand it clearly. Then he folded the inland form and stood up. Though he was tired after the day's work, he set off imme-





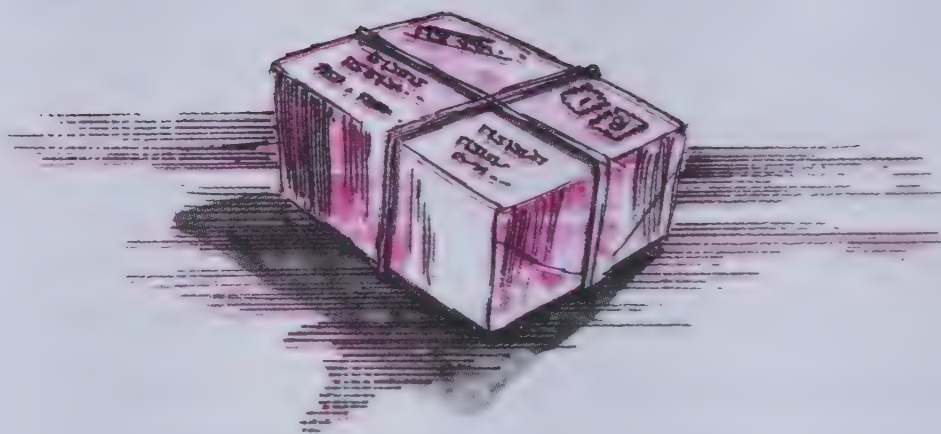
diately to post the letter. This was despite the fact that the post went only in the morning and he himself would take it out and send it, for the key to the letter-box was kept by him! Even so, Dak Babu felt that he would be at peace only after putting the letter in the letter-box.

The night was foggy and it looked as if it might rain. So



he hurried to the post office. A dog was curled up in the corner, sheltering from the cold. He rushed up barking. Dak Babu stamped his feet and chased the creature away. He reached the letter-box and dropped the letter in. When he heard the plop of the letter as it fell in, he felt as if it had already reached Suresh.

His task accomplished, Dak Babu returned home.





## NINE

The next day Dak Babu got ready as usual and set off for the post office. Just what he had feared occurred. Everyone wanted to know about the stone. Dak Babu was almost driven mad by their questions.

The first confrontation was with Govind, the grocer. "Dak Babu," he said, "I have been in a state of shock ever since I heard."

Dak Babu ignored him and went on. He saw Lala Mukut Bihari limping determinedly towards him. The Lala stopped him and asked, "Dak Babu, what did you do with that stone? If you haven't thrown it away, do so at once. That sort of thing shouldn't be left lying around at home."

A little further on the Purohit had the same advice to give. "Dak Babu, one should get rid of anything that causes harm. You were quite right to throw that stone into the river. We have been saved from a major calamity."

Everyone who had a voice, contributed to the discussion. Someone said, "Dak Babu, you made one mistake. If you had handed over the parcel to the police you would have





been saved all this headache.”

Somebody else was sure it was all black magic. Such incidents had become very common, he said.

A third person suggested, “Find that boy. Report him to the police. That will show him.”

And, when Dak Babu was passing the school, the boys spotted him and immediately started singing a film song:

O don't anyone  
throw a stone  
at my beloved!

Dak Babu smiled a little, at their impudence.

When he reached the post office he found that Keshav had still not arrived. He had to unlock the door himself. “That lazybones does nothing but loll around. He must be dawdling along at a snail's pace, or he must have stopped



to gossip."

But, as soon as Dak babu went inside, Keshav arrived panting. "I'm sorry, Sir! I'm a little late," he apologized.

"You must have stuffed yourself last night. That's why you couldn't wake up in time. Why are you standing there open-mouthed? Hurry and take the letters from the post box. Let me see you postmarking them."

This last sentence threw Keshav into a tizzy. Lately there had been complaints that letters hadn't been reaching, and murmurs that perhaps the stamps were being stolen. Some one had even hinted at Keshav... Keshav was really disturbed. Had even Dak Babu begun to suspect him? He had never stolen a stamp in his whole life!

This was perfectly true. Dak Babu knew it. Keshav might be foolish and lazy, but he was not a thief. Now seeing Keshav's crestfallen countenance Dak Babu snapped, "What's the matter? Why are you sulking? Hurry up with that post!"

Keshav got up without a word, picked up the key, took the letters out of the post-box, and sat down carefully on his three-legged chair.

Dak Babu got up and stood by Keshav's desk.

Keshav quaked in his shoes. Looking at Dak Babu with his heart in his mouth, he said pathetically, "Dak Babu, I am speaking the truth. I have done nothing wrong. I am innocent."

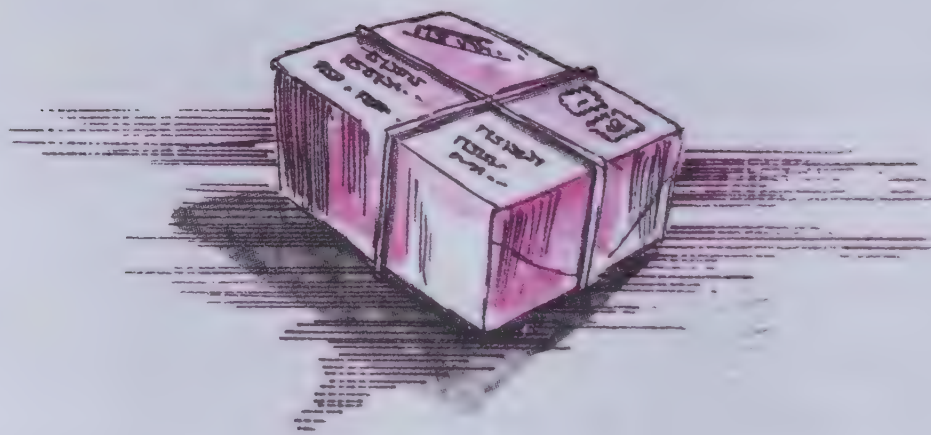
Dak Babu had no idea what Keshav was talking about. So he said sharply, "Are you just plain stupid? Babbling nonsense all the time! Get down to work."

The reason Dak Babu was standing by Keshav was that he wanted to see the letter to Suresh being stamped in front of



his very own eyes.

“Thak-thak-thak” Keshav stamped one letter after another. Dak Babu watched him intently. Then it was turn of the letter to Suresh. Once that was stamped, Dak Babu heaved a sigh of relief. He once more felt as though the letter had reached Suresh safely. Wiping his brow with his handkerchief, he said to Keshav, “Hurry up and finish. It is getting late.” And with that he returned to his chair and sank into it.





## TEN

Every morning Dak Babu now awaited Suresh's reply. He knew that letters took a long time but he still looked through the post anxiously day after day, and was bitterly disappointed when he found no letter from him. Sometimes Dak Babu wondered whether he would receive a reply at all, and if Suresh did reply as to what kind of reply it would be. After all, he had no idea of what Suresh was like. Perhaps this Suresh saw the whole thing as a huge joke. Perhaps Suresh would roar with laughter on getting his letter. Perhaps even now he was showing the letter to his school friends and saying, "Look here, what a fool I've made of this postmaster!"

More than a week passed in this uncertainty. Dak Babu lost all hope. He realized that some smart school-boy from Delhi was having a lot of fun at his expense. If he was going to get a reply he would have got it by now.

When Dak Babu had given up all hope, Suresh's letter suddenly arrived. Hands trembling, Dak Babu opened the inland form and took in the entire page from top to bottom in





a flash. As he read on he was filled with joy. Suresh had written most respectfully. The words that enchanted Dak Babu were the following:

*Respected Dak Babu,*

*Namaskar. I don't know how to thank you for the great favour you have done me. Now I'll explain everything — why I sent you the stone.*



When we were returning from Manali we stopped for a short time in your village. Our car had broken down. While my father was repairing it I wandered down to the banks of the Beas. I was charmed by the beauty of the scene. The clear, pure, gurgling water and the lovely surroundings — trees and plants. But even more than all that, what struck me was the beauty of the stones which lay between the two boulders by the river. They were in all shapes and sizes, some round, some flat. Well, I just couldn't resist picking one up and bringing it back with me.

When we returned to Delhi, however, a very strange thing happened — something almost impossible to believe.

I had kept the stone on the table in my room. One night I was fast asleep when I was woken up by a sound. It seemed as if someone was sitting in my room, sobbing.

I was terrified. Who could it be? I peered around the dark room. The fan was whirling overhead. Everything seemed normal. First I thought it was my imagination, or that I had woken up in the middle of a dream—but no. There was someone in the room and he was sobbing away.

I was petrified but taking courage in both hands, I reached out and switched on the table-lamp next to me. The room was flooded with light. I looked around — I could see no one. Suddenly my eyes fell on the table with the stone on it. It seemed as if the stone was moving, rocking back and forth. The sound was coming from it.

I was very frightened. No one would believe that I had seen this extraordinary sight. And then I heard what the stone was saying. It said, "Why did you bring me here? I want to go back. My brothers and sisters are all there. My friends and relatives are





*there. We live together, winter and summer. I'm very unhappy parted from them. And, they too must be sad. I am miserable here.*

*Please, please, somehow send me back, send me back, send me back...." The voice kept repeating these words.*

*I stood there stunned. First I thought of waking up everyone at home. But I didn't dare; I was sure no one would believe me. They would think me mad. They would only make fun of me....*



Then I heard my mother calling from the next room, "Suresh, why has your light been on so long? What's the matter?"

Startled, I quickly thought up an excuse. "Nothing, Mummy. I just wanted a glass of water." Mother replied sleepily, "All right. Go back to bed. It's the middle of the night."

For some time I stared hard at the stone. Now it was absolutely still. Surely I had not dreamt it all or imagined it. No. I had seen the stone move with my own eyes. And I had heard it speak with my own ears.

It was some time before I went back to bed and switched off the light. But how could I fall asleep again? The voice I had heard kept ringing in my ears. Then decided what I must do. I must send back the stone as quickly as possible. As soon as I made up my mind, I was at peace and able to go back to sleep.

The next day I could think of nothing else. How was I to send the stone so far away? And to whom? There seemed to be no way. Then I thought of you. We had seen your post office. So that was that. I said to myself that I would parcel the stone to you and request you to place it on the banks of the river where it belonged.

This is the story of the stone.

It was so kind of you to do what I asked and for this I am very grateful. I thank you again and again. If I ever come to the Valley again, I will certainly visit you.

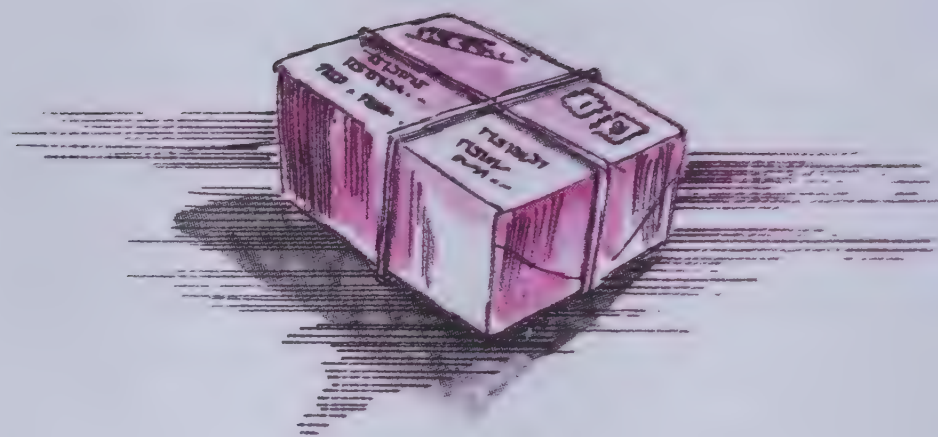
Yours sincerely,  
Suresh

At the end there was a postscript which read.

You know the pakoda-walla on the roadside. He uses bad cooking oil. We ate his pakodas and all had bad throats on the way



*back. We needed injections when we returned to Delhi. Why do you allow such a person to keep a stall there?*





## ELEVEN

This letter removed all Dak Babu's doubts. He began to smile.

Sitting on his three-legged chair, Keshav was looking at Dak Babu through the corner of his eye. When he saw his boss in such a good mood, he began to grin too.

Just then Dak Babu caught sight of Balram walking down the street and remembered that the money-order from his brother had arrived. Taking it out quickly from the bundle of money-order forms, he went to the door and called out to Balram, "Come here!"

On hearing Dak Babu's voice, Balram was panic-stricken. He stood rooted to the spot and gazed fearfully at the older man.

"Arre, come here," said Dak Babu impatiently. "Staring at me as though I were a daku about to loot you. I'm only Dak Babu. Your brother's money-order has arrived..."

"Really!" Balram broke into a wide smile. His joy made Dak Babu very happy. When you make someone happy, you feel happy yourself.





Dak Babu scolded him affectionately. "What do you mean, 'really'? Do you think I'm lying? See here." And he showed him the money-order.

Balram could not believe his eyes at first. But, after all, the money-order was in Dak Babu's hand. It was no dream!

Dak Babu said, "Go and call your father."

Balram felt as if he were floating on air. Then he suddenly shouted, "It's come! It's come!" and raced off.









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